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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes that elements of pragmatist philosophy are anti-rhetorical and encourage a cultural status quo. It tries to isolate the idiosyncratic meaning of the vocabulary that Charles Sanders Peirce uses in the foundational definition of pragmatism and shows how his reliance on logic forestalls possibilities for agency. Antonio Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual is used to look for a way out of the over-determined structure that Peirce establishes. Peirce was a multi-talented scholar who did ground-breaking work in many disciplines, such as physics, astronomy, mathematics, semiotics, logic, psychology, and philosophy. In defining pragmatism, Peirce's focus on interpretation would make pragmatism very useful to cultural studies, but he did not see interpretation as offering a range of possible meanings. Alternatives are possible in a world where the national conditions are real and individuals' relations to them can be different. But in Peirce's world, objects and their consequences are real and individuals' relations to them are deterministic, thus rendering his formulation anti-rhetorical. (Contains five references). (Author/NKA)

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The Metanarrative of Consequences in the Pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce
by Greg Wilson

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Abstract:

This paper proposes that elements of pragmatist philosophy are anti-rhetorical and encourage a cultural status quo. I try to isolate the idiosyncratic meaning of the vocabulary that Charles Sanders Peirce uses in the foundational definition of pragmatism, and show how his reliance on logic forestalls possibilities for agency. I use Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual to look for a way out of the over-determined structure that Peirce establishes.

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The promise of Pragmatist philosophy is that it offers an alternative to the philosophical dead ends of traditional Western metaphysics. It focuses on the experience of the real world and not abstractions of philosophical concepts. Mostly, pragmatism revolves around what seems a common sense appeal to consequences. We can decide upon what course of action to pursue by examining the consequences that different courses of action will have.

The originator of pragmatist philosophy was Charles Sanders Peirce, a multi-talented scholar who did ground-breaking work in physics, astronomy, mathematics, semiotics, logic, psychology, and philosophy. His formulation of pragmatism was adapted by William James and John Dewey, among others. Neopragmatists today, like Richard Rorty, maintain many of the core concepts of Peirce's pragmatism, but with substantial differences.

In 1871, Peirce defined pragmatism in this way.

> Consider what effects which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Roskelly 498)

This is an appealing philosophical maxim for rhetoricians because of rhetoric's classical engagement with finding the available means of persuasion in a particular case. We choose a means of persuasion based on the consequences we think it will have. As many of us also see rhetoric as a means of effecting social change—rhetoric being the most important tool of the citizen—pragmatism is an appealing roll-up-your-sleeves-and-do-something philosophy. Although as Steven Mailloux has warned, pragmatism may lead rhetoricians into expediency and sophistry, placing too much faith in the idea "Truth is what works" and justifying any means to achieve a desired end.

Peirce's definition of pragmatism takes on a slightly different meaning when we unpack what he means by the specific vocabulary he uses. Peirce advocated a triadic system of semiotics similar in some ways to de Saussure's dyadic semiotics. de

Saussure described linguistic signs as having two parts: (1) the *signified* is the concept, and (2) the *signifier* is the sound image for that concept. For Peirce there were three pieces. Individuals perceive objects and perception creates a thought, or sign, for that *object* in the individual's mind. The *sign*, however, is not immediately understood. The sign becomes understood through a subsequent thought or action (*interpretant*). For example, a child who sees chocolate cake for the first time will have a sign, but will not understand the object until a later thought or action (like eating the cake) allows her to interpret the sign. From then on, the sign of chocolate cake will have a meaning. Three useful points here:

- Understanding is not as immediate as perception (as some scientistic epistemologies might suggest) but is mediated.
- Mediation is not through language, but through thought. (Unlike de Saussure's linguistic semiotics)
- Interpretation has a close tie to material objects and their interactions/effects/consequences. You can't understand chocolate cake without interacting with the effect of the chocolate cake.

So, getting back to Peirce's definition of pragmatism: the "effects . . . we conceive the object of our conception to have" is an interpretant in terms of the triadic semiotic. When he says "our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object," he is saying something more than we can gain insight into things by noting their consequences. He is putting consequences at the center of man's cognitive system in a descriptive and not prescriptive manner. This focus on interpretation would make pragmatism very useful to cultural studies, but Peirce did not see interpretation as a offering a range of possible meanings. What he describes is a closed system where interpretants imply much more precise and fixed meanings. In his essay "The Fixation of Belief," Peirce explains how our beliefs are caused by an "external permanency" that is not influenced by human thought.

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> [T]he method* must be such that the ultimate conclusion of every man shall be the same. Such is the method of science. Its fundamental hypothesis, restated in more familiar language is this: There are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those realities affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really are, and any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion. The new conception here involved is that of reality. (Peirce, "Fixation" 120).

(*By "method" Peirce here means an explanation of how beliefs come into being.)

The bedrock of all of Peirce's philosophy and writings across all disciplines is rigorous logic. In this passage, Peirce describes how logic (i.e., reasoning) is the operational characteristic of interpretation. Logic is how we move from perception to the "one true conclusion" implied by that perception. Because logic is universal and reality is the same for both, two women who see the same chocolate cake should be lead to the same one true conclusion. That one true conclusion is the understanding of the object's consequences.

It becomes apparent that the philosophy that Peirce describes is anti-rhetorical. If everyone in a community is logical, then there is no need for discourse, we will all see the need for the same course of action, we will all understand the same potential consequence. So instead of pragmatism being a philosophy that generates practical answers, it appears to be a simplistic worldview that doesn't account for obvious complexity. If the child sees a pistol and not a piece of chocolate cake, what is the interpretant for the pistol? What is the consequence, the one true conclusion that would allow the child to understand the object? Obviously, there are a myriad of overlapping, conflicting, and supplementary consequences that could come to be associated with the sign of the pistol.

When Peirce suggests that consequences are inherent to objects, he reifies consequences. If there is a "one true conclusion" (a single consequence) for any

object, then that consequence must exist before we use logic to discover it. He establishes a pragmatist metanarrative that stifles the possibility for agency or subjectivity. His pragmatism suggests a logical determinism that elides possibility for "diff[illegible]t . . . relations to objects". The only true relationship is the one that becomes obvious to us when we apply logic, all others are illusory.

To the extent that other pragmatist philosophies rely upon the metanarrative of consequences (in whole or in part) they too are stifling the possibility for agency. William James later writes that the pragmatic method is a means of dismissing interminable metaphysical disputes (James 54). For example, are the consequences of the egg coming before the chicken (or vice versa) important at all? In a weaker sense, this still relies on a reified notion of consequences, because it counts on their being a finite set of consequences to define, or more likely, a single consequence that all parties can agree upon. That's a simplistic view of interactions that assumes all objects and individuals in the universe behave like billiard balls. It reduces perception, thought, and understanding to an equation.

In its many incarnations, Pragmatism is intended as a bourgeois project for the liberation of the masses, democratizing them and leading them to philosophic agency. The metanarrative of consequences, however, cements the role of career intellectuals who will always be needed to define what is logical, what constitutes common sense, and to steer the mob back towards the correct one-true-conclusion. This creates a dangerous opportunity for the reinscription and reproduction of dominant ideology. When Peirce claims in "The Fixation of Belief" that "any man, if he have sufficient experience and reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion," Peirce is setting up his own Harvard-educated common sense as the common sense that every man must agree with. Any other views are illogical.

Gramsci cites common sense as ideology's most powerful form, more so than religion or philosophy; Patrick Brantlinger writes: "Common sense is the ideological

glue or cement that binds a social formation together by making its institutions and arrangements of power seem natural and wise" (Brantlinger 96). Gramsci offers no escape from ideology but suggests that the organic intellectual who exists within the class she is trying to liberate is preferable to the traditional intellectual who is imperceptibly but undeniably caught up in historical class relations. Brantlinger explains,

> According to this formulation, the "organic" intellectuals attached to the working class carry on the task of radical social critique and of educating "the masses." That education must have as its first goal the breaking down of the "hegemony" of the ruling class, and a main site of contestation will be the common sense of "the masses." Truth on this account is inescapably political and relative, a matter of class struggle and power relations within society. Nevertheless, "arbitrary" ideologies or ideological patterns reinforce common sense and rationalize the status quo, while "organic" ones demystify and liberate by anatomizing "hegemony" and pointing to alternative social possibilities. (Brantlinger 97)

Thus, the organic pragmatist must understand the ways in which she is interpolated by dominant ideology and the ways in which she is interpolated by the material conditions and point to alternatives, which are the only escape from interpolation. Alternatives are possible in a world where the material conditions are real and our relations to them can be different, but not in Peirce's world where objects and their consequences are real and our relations to them are deterministic. Peirce's formulation is anti-rhetorical. There is no room for rhetoric if logic is leading us all by the hand to natural conclusions, nor if we are lead by hegemonic common sense to conclusions that serve others' interests. Rhetoric becomes the tool of the organic pragmatist, inciting the masses to deliberate upon alternative social possibilities.

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